

College to close out "open theism" scholar: John E. Sanders and Huntington College

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

After escaping an ouster a year ago by the Evangelical Theological Society, a leading proponent of "open theism" theology is being shown the door by trustees at Huntington (Indiana) College for his "notoriety" among evangelical pastors.

John E. Sanders, who has taught religion and philosophy at Huntington for nearly seven years, was informed by President G. Blair Dowden in October that the trustees do not want the professor's contract to be renewed after the spring semester.

Sanders and noted evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock were acquitted of holding aberrant theological positions by the theological society in November 2003. But years of controversy had spotlighted Sanders, the author of *The God Who Risks* (1998) and coauthor with four others (including William Hasker, now a professor emeritus at Huntington College) of *The Openness of God* (1994).

In the latter book, Sanders wrote that humans have free will to "cooperate or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us." God, though risk-taking, is endlessly resourceful toward his ultimate goals. Yet, Sanders and colleagues said, "God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures."

Sanders said in an interview that the college's president and academic dean in the past had been supportive of him. "Other faculty, who affirm open theism, have asked if they would be fired as well, and they were told no," Sanders said, adding that President Dowden said that Sanders's books could still be used in classrooms at the small evangelical college.

"It's only if your name gets into the churches that you risk being terminated," Sanders told the Century.

Some students at the college, which has an enrollment of 975 students and will rename itself Huntington University next year, have begun selling T-shirts, coffee mugs, buttons and banners proclaiming “Save John Sanders” or “I Love Academic Freedom.”

The student group dubbed itself “Page 6,” referring to a page in the college catalog that has a statement saying: “The College must accept disagreement and controversy as a normal and healthy part of its life as a college, rather than viewing them as a threat to be avoided by silence on controversial topics.”

College Communications Director John Paff, also executive assistant to the school president, said, “While no official action has been taken [by the trustees], it has become clear that there is little support among trustees for Dr. Sanders to remain at Huntington College.” Paff said the professor indicated that he is pursuing other teaching options, which Sanders confirmed.

The Evangelical Theological Society, which has more than 2,000 members, has not dropped its objections to open theism.

At its annual meeting last month in San Antonio, Texas, members endorsed the ETS executive committee’s efforts in the coming year to redefine “biblical inerrancy” in its litmus-test statement of faith. Members voted against revoking Sanders’s ETS membership in 2003 because many could not agree on whether his theological approach undermined the principle of biblical inerrancy.

While most mainline Protestant and Catholic thinkers have no problems with open theism, the struggle within evangelicalism is seen by some as a battle between free-will Christians and Calvinists.

“When it comes to prayer,” Sanders said, open theism is a very relevant issue for evangelicals. “It is catching on, but it will take a couple of decades before it’s fully accepted.”